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AUTHOR Marx, Gary
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ABSTRACT

To help administrators build confidence in their schools, this document offers 12 suggestions to foster better communication, increased confidence, and more effective schools. Each suggestion is discussed and examples are provided of how to carry out the suggestion. The 12 suggestions are to (1) strive for school quality, (2) create a spirit of caring in the school, (3) share the good news about schools, (4) show connections between education and future hopes (5) work with, not against, other individuals and groups in the schools, (6) get the community on the school team, (7) reduce the amount of hassle that schools perpetrate, (8) demonstrate that the school has a sense of direction, (9) be an educational leader in the community, (10) create substantive themes for rallying staff and community members around the school, (11) be an effective communicator, and (12) have confidence in yourself. (Author/RW)

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BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

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2

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), working in concert with national teacher, board, principal, parent and other educational organizations, is committed to building confidence in our schools. This publication, written by AASA Associate Executive Director Gary Marx, presents dozens of suggestions which could lead to even more effective schools, better communication and increased confidence.

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Parents . . . Partners in Education and *Los Padres . . . Participantes En La Educación*, American Association of School Administrators, 12 pages, 1982

Parents . . . Partners in Education, 25 minute video program, American Association of School Administrators, 1982

Building Confidence in Your Schools, National School Public Relations Association, 224 pages, 1978

Time on Task, American Association of School Administrators, 77 pages, 1982

Building Confidence in Education, National Association of Secondary School Principals, 52 pages, 1982

A Profound Transformation, audio-visual program on education in a changing society, American Association of School Administrators, 25 minutes, 1980

Some Points To Make When You Talk About Schools, American Association of School Administrators, 12 pages, 1982

The Quest for Confidence

Confidence! The word itself can inspire. Confidence is trust. Confidence is assurance. Confidence is a belief in self . . . a belief in others . . . a belief in our institutions.

During the past decade, confidence in most institutions declined. Some blame Watergate. Some say our institutions have been unable to keep pace with the growing and changing needs of the people they are meant to serve. Whatever the reason, confidence has waned.

Confidence, like charity, begins at home. It is contagious. And so, indeed, is the lack of it. Granted, maintaining a high level of personal confidence may be difficult when we are buffeted by change, laden with increasing expectations and limited by diminishing resources. But as educators, we must maintain our personal confidence at a level so high that we virtually radiate it to our professional colleagues, our students and our communities. Sharing a spirit of confidence may be the first step in receiving it.

The challenge of building confidence in our schools has been analyzed, discussed and discussed again. While analysis and thoughtful discussion are vital in identifying the problem, the time has come for solutions. Many schools have undertaken confidence building efforts which are paying off. Recent studies show confidence in education is going up, a phenomenon not necessarily true of other institutions.

This publication, *Building Public Confidence In Our Schools,* presents some ideas for positive action. It is not a "magic formula." However, it is designed for those who want to be on with the task of building confidence in our nation's most essential institution . . . the schools.

BUILDING
PUBLIC
CONFIDENCE
IN OUR
SCHOOLS

Strive for Quality

No matter how good our schools are or how good they have been, they must become even better tomorrow. Our schools must meet the educational needs of people in a fast changing world.

An exceilent product is basic. It is the very foundation for our schools. What we teach and how well we teach it have a profound effect on how people feel about the schools in our community.

Those of us who are involved in the schools should work to create a spirit, a climate in which excellence can thrive. We should welcome information that helps us understand how well students are actually learning. Each day, we should ask ourselves how we could make our schools even more effective. Here are a few additional suggestions as we pursue quality. We should:

- Be committed to helping every student succeed to the limits of his or her ability.
- Plan for the year and each school day . . . and follow the plan.
- Make sure students spend enough time on the right tasks.
- Develop high, yet realistic expectations for students.
- Study developments in learning theory and apply what we learn in the classroom to assure that students are mastering needed knowledge and skills.
- Work toward a solution when parents, students or others express a concern or present a problem. Avoid defensiveness. Instead, let's explore the problem with concern for its effect on the overall school program and individual student learning.
- Work toward building parent support for what happens in the classroom.
- Ask, "Is this the kind of school I'd want my child to attend?"

As educators, we should radiate our enthusiasm for high quality education and let the community know we want to provide the best possible education in the nation . . . right here in our school.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Create a Spirit of Caring

As educators, it is our business to care! We must care about our students and how well they are learning. We must care about our community and demonstrate it through providing an excellent education for students. We must care about each other within the schools. Schools must be caring institutions.

Here are some of the ways we can demonstrate our spirit of caring:

- A parent confronts us with a concern. How can we demonstrate that we care? We should listen carefully, ask clarifying questions, paraphrase the concern, express understanding and focus on a solution. Problem solving is, in itself, an indication that we care.
- A student is having problems that affect his or her school work. What can we do to say, "I care?" We may wish to contact the student's parents and ask their help in getting back on the road to success. In some cases, we might want to try a new approach for that student in the classroom.
- We should respond thoughtfully and as promptly as possible to telephone calls or other correspondence.
- Each of us, whether we realize it or not, communicates a sense of caring, or a lack of it, through our tone of voice and our nonverbal expressions. Let's be sure these expressions are appropriate for the situation.
- Let's also remember that each student must experience some success. Through happiness notes, encouraging comments and recognition, we can help students feel accepted and successful. Success is the fuel of motivation for even greater success.

We care! That's why we are part of the great educational enterprise. Sometimes, we simply need to show it a bit more.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Share the Good News About Schools

There is plenty of good news happening in our schools. In fact, there is ample evidence that our schools are among the most successful institutions in our society. Consider these facts:

- In 1910, the average 25 year old had completed only 8.1 years of schooling. Now, that figure stands at 12.5 years.
- In 1900, only 6 percent of students in the nation completed high school. Today, that figure has risen to 74 percent.
- The National Assessment for Educational Progress is showing marked improvement for 9 year olds in all areas of reading performance and SAT scores have stabilized.
- Our nation's literacy rate, according to the United Nations, is among the highest in the world, 99 percent.

The first step in sharing the good news is identifying it. How about this approach? On a regular basis, individually, in faculty and "school family" meetings, let's brainstorm the answers to these questions:

- What are the indicators of our success?
- What's happening here that people need to know about?
- What are the challenges we face and how are we dealing with them?

Then, through newsletters, talks with parents and other citizens, good news notes, speeches, community meetings, planned phone calls and other channels, let's share the wealth. Keep in mind that sharing the challenges and what we're doing to deal with them will make the good news even more credible.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Show Connections

An educated citizenry is basic to a free society. Thomas Jefferson made that connection clear when he said, "Any nation that expects to be both ignorant and free . . . expects what never was and never will be." In our nation, we are committed to making education available to all, not just the chosen few.

- In our communication with professional colleagues, citizens and students we should show the connection between high quality education and the hopes and dreams we have for ourselves and for our nation.
- We should remind our fellow citizens that a well educated people is basic to a viable defense, a sound economy and our nation's competitive position among the nations of the world.
- Let's explain to business people, non-parent taxpayers, government leaders and others the *benefits* for them or the people they serve in supporting excellent schools. We should also explain the high cost of neglecting education.
- Here's another kind of connection we might establish in the classroom. Some students lose interest when they don't understand the reason for studying a certain subject or developing a specific skill. Perhaps we should begin each class period by briefly explaining the connection between "what we're learning in class today and how it will benefit us now or in the future."

The people of our community . . . the people of our nation should receive constant reminders that the future is in school today.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Work with Each Other . . . Not Against Each Other

Whatever we do in the schools, we are part of the educational team. While individuals and groups within the schools may have differences about how to get some things done most effectively, we should not let those differences stand in the way of our continuing quest to provide top quality education. Our real objective is to assure excellent education for all students.

Here are a few suggestions:

- When problems arise that involve others, let's be sensitive to our needs and theirs, always keeping the best interest of students out front.
- We should strive for a team relationship, always considering how our plans might affect others and seeking their advice.
- Tempting as it is, we should avoid blaming others when confronted with school problems. Instead, we should share the problems with those who can help solve them.
- As educators, we should keep in mind that when we criticize each other, the public believes both of us.

BUILDING
PUBLIC
CONFIDENCE
IN OUR
SCHOOLS

Get the Community on the School Team

We can't do it alone. To be successful, our schools need the help and support of parents, non-parents, the business community and many others. And the community needs us.

When other institutions have difficulty dealing with the problems of society, they inevitably "turn to the schools." Today, our educational agenda is filled with important concerns ranging from providing education for the handicapped to helping students understand the new technology.

When schools need support, they must depend on the community for help. That's just one reason why citizens must understand the important role they must play if we are to provide excellence in education. They must see the benefits for them in high quality schools. For example, senior citizens have a self interest in making sure there are plenty of well educated people making enough money to keep Social Security solvent. Business people have a self interest in assuring a well educated, well trained work force with enough earning potential to guarantee plenty of future customers with spendable incomes.

Coalitions can bring together many groups in the community which share a common interest in quality schools. Working together with interested people of diverse backgrounds and various walks of life, we can better assure that our schools are responsive to community needs. In turn, the needs of our schools become more apparent to citizens.

We need more than school spirit. We need spirit for the schools. Let's make high quality education a community decision. Then, let's work together to make it happen.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Help People More . . . Hassle People Less

Ever wait patiently in a long line at the grocery store only to have the cash register tape run out? No one seems to know how to replace it. You're forced to go to the end of another long line. You feel hassled.

All organizations, even schools, hassle people. They shouldn't, but they do. People come to us for help, to express a concern, to seek advice, and they sometimes feel their requests for help are drowned in complexity. Hassling is something we all understand because we have all endured it.

Consider the following:

- Remember that little things mean a great deal. What may seem like an insignificant request or problem to us may be very important to someone else.
- It takes about as much time to help as it does to hassle. Hassling often creates even greater problems that are even more time consuming.
- Start a hassle list. If we have hassled someone, deliberately or inadvertently, we should make note of it . . . maybe even jot it down. Doing so will sharpen our awareness of the need to be even more helpful.
- Being an educator can be stressful. We are faced with many demands. Therefore, it makes good sense for us to manage that stress in a way that will allow us to be open and helpful in our school relationships.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Demonstrate a Sense of Direction

In a world that sometimes seems adrift, people want their institutions to have a sense of direction . . . to know where they are going. Parents generally want to know what will be expected of their students. Most citizens are interested in what they can expect from the schools.

- In general communication with parents and others in the community we should be clear about the mission and goals of the school system.
- Let's clarify for parents what their students will be studying and how they can help.
- We should be prepared to let parents know how their students are doing in learning specific material or developing certain skills.
- As a general rule, we should anticipate questions parents, students, school staff and others might have about new or existing programs. Then, we should share that information through newsletters, conferences with parents and other communications activities.

Knowing where we are going, coupled with a full measure of flexibility, is a key to leadership as we strive to meet the educational needs of our community and the students in our schools.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Be an Educational Leader In the Community

Our responsibilities as educators do not stop at the schoolhouse door. Wherever we go . . . whatever we are doing . . . we represent the schools. People look to us for a clearer understanding of issues such as:

- The educational program
- Financial needs of the schools
- How students learn and how our instructional methods meet their learning needs
- The impact of declining or increasing enrollments, proposed legislation or court decisions
- How the schools can play a part in building an even better community.

How can we help parents and other citizens develop an even better understanding of these issues?

- Be interested Stay well informed about the schools. Thoughtfully study information which is shared to keep us up to date.
- Share information about schools in contacts with parents and other citizens, through newsletters, community meetings and other channels.
- If we don't know the answer to a question, we should refer the question and the questioner to someone who can help, avoiding speculation or rumor.

Our schools are a vital part of the communities they serve. Each of us should assure that the needs and interests of the schools are represented in all significant community endeavors. What affects the community will ultimately affect the schools . . . and what affects the schools will ultimately affect the community.

13

BUILDING
PUBLIC
CONFIDENCE
IN OUR
SCHOOLS

Create Substantive Themes

We are caught up in a world of persistent themes. "Johnny Can't Read" is a theme. "Back to Basics" is a theme. Today, many schools are developing their own themes rather than sitting back and letting others develop themes for them.

An effective theme should be a short, yet substantive consensus statement. It should be a rallying cry for staff and community. And a theme should be supported by substance. If we develop a theme stating that we hope to make our schools even better, then we should share our plans for improvement.

Many themes today are focused on efforts to make what we do even more effective. A few examples include: "Expect Excellence," "Quest for Quality" and "Getting Better for Kids."

Consider a theme for your school, for your curriculum area, for your classroom. Remember, a theme can help set a direction. A substantive theme can be motivational. And, at best, a theme can even be inspiring.

14

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Be an Effective Communicator

For anyone in public life, communications skills are survival skills. We must plan for communication before any lack of it plans us. How can we go about planning for communication? Here are a few questions to ask. The answers will yield a basic communications plan:

1. "If we're going to be successful in our school system, our school or in this school program, *who* needs to know, be involved or understand? Whose advice do we need? Who will be affected?" (This step will help us identify important publics inside and outside the schools.)
2. "If we are going to be successful, *what* do each of these groups need to understand?" (This step will help us identify the content of our messages.)
3. "What communications channels or activities will we use to get the message through or to involve people in the process?" (Eg. newsletters, advisory groups, phone calls) Then, do some checking to be sure the message is reaching its intended audience, and is being understood.

Communication means listening as well as telling. In some schools, staff members make a phone call a week to a parent to ask how things are going. The feedback can be invaluable in helping us provide the best possible education for each student and in building good will. Listening and responding to needs . . . and keeping people informed is basic to the very legitimacy of a democratic institution.

Basic to effective communication is openness and honesty. The facts, whatever they are, are seldom as damaging as misinformation or misunderstanding. And each person in the schools is an important communicator of information and attitudes.

We must also keep in mind that personal experiences will override any amount of information. If people have good experiences with the schools, those experiences will generally overcome unfavorable news. On the other hand, if people have not had good experiences, they will not likely believe even the good news. How well we communicate makes a big difference in how those we serve feel about us.

BUILDING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Have Confidence in Yourself

Sometimes, as educators, we feel unjustly criticized. We are concerned about increasing demands, competition for resources and hostility toward our institutions.

We have a choice. We can allow our spirits to be crushed by these challenges or we can forcefully and enthusiastically deal with them. With courage, commitment and a positive attitude, we can become fountains of confidence in our communities. Consider this approach:

- Let's share our enthusiasm about what we do with everyone inside and outside the schools.
- We should look upon criticism as an indication of interest and concern.
- While we should not over-react, we must keep in mind that a statement of concern may contain a valuable idea that can make education even more effective.
- When people want quality and "want it now," we may want to confidently enlist their support. Achieving high quality education is a team effort involving the schools, parents, students and the community.
- Proudly share the successes of our schools. Openly discuss the challenges we face and how we are working to deal with those challenges.

Our nation was built upon a philosophy of "possibility." That possibility is unlocked and encouraged through education. As educators, we hold a valued and sacred trust. To a great extent, the very future of our free and democratic society is in our hands. Sometimes we forget how important what we do really is to the future of our nation. What we do is worth every ounce of enthusiasm, energy and commitment we can give it. Our reward is in knowing we have made a supreme contribution to our community, our nation, our world and hundreds of magnificent people who are . . . or have been . . . our students.